MASS. ED20.50:1/2/991-92

UMASS/AMHERST
312066 0362 9002 1

GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS
COLLECTION

OCT 1994

University of Massachusetts
Depository Copy

STUDENT ADVISORY COUNCIL

TO THE BOARD OF EDUCATION

MID-YEAR REPORT
1991-1992

JOHN CASHMAN
CHAIRPERSON

MASSACHUSETTS STUDENT ADVISORY COUNCIL
1991-1992 MID-YEAR REPORT

Background

The Student Advisory Council to the Massachusetts Board of Education was established by Chapter 1009 of the Acts of 1971. The Student Advisory Council is comprised of eleven regional student advisory councils and one state student advisory council. Each high school student body in the Commonwealth elects two delegates to one of the eleven regional councils, which are then collapsed into six operating councils. The eleven regional councils, in turn, elect four delegates each to the state Student Advisory Council. The state council elects three officers: a secretary, vice-chairperson, and a chairperson who serves as a voting member of the Board of Education, representing the council and the secondary school students of the Commonwealth. Department of Education staff provide technical assistance to this six hundred member Student Advisory Council.

The Student Advisory Council has been an effective body in advocating for increased student involvement in decision-making in schools. Since its inception, the Council has accomplished the following:

- Increased student representation in decision-making through sponsoring enacted legislation which: (a) created Handbook Review Committees in high schools; (b) created the Student Advisory Committees to School Committees; (SAC to SC); (c) established the chair of the SAC to SC as an ex-officio member of the School Committee; (d) included student representation on school improvement councils; (e) provided a process for students and parents to create high school courses; and (f) established the opportunity for school committees to adopt student rights provisions.

- Advocated for student rights through developing the publication, "Check it Out: A Student's Guide to Rights and Responsibilities", and training thousands of students on their rights and how to responsibly organize for them.

- Increased student voice on a wide range of educational affairs through representation on all Department advisory boards and committees.

- Lobbied for quality public education through providing testimony at Legislative hearings, educating students on budget issues, and organizing students in local schools.

The State Council continues to meet monthly in four task forces - Legislative, Social Issues, School Programs and Newsletter. However, this year the council structure has experienced curtailed activities that reflect the current disinvestment in public education. With the closing of the Department regional centers and reduction in Department staffing, the six regional councils now meet only quarterly, as opposed to monthly in prior years. The two Western Massachusetts councils now meet together as one council in a central location, making attendance at these meetings difficult for students from rural high schools in outlying districts. The reduction in number of meetings and the combining of the two Western Massachusetts councils have reduced the effectiveness of the Student Advisory Council as a democratic student body that represents the public high school students of this state.

Introduction

Mid-year for the State Student Advisory Council signals the time to re-define our goals, look back at our accomplishments and focus on the remainder of the year. This report covers these three aspects, and will help to broaden the understanding of the Council.

The Student Advisory Council, along with all aspects of education, has had to bear the burden of fiscal constraints. For the fourth consecutive year, we were unable to hold a mid-year retreat, which was used to rejuvenate interest, refocus the council, and expand our role in education. For the first year, the regional councils only have the financial means and necessary staffing to meet quarterly. This has greatly compromised the council's ability to provide the statewide interaction of members which makes this council unique.

Regardless of the constraints, the council has proven to be an active and vital part of education. The four task forces developed during our leadership conference have worked hard over the previous months and have promising goals for the future. The regional council meetings have provided students with valuable information regarding students rights, handbook review, AIDS/HIV education, and education reform.

In addition to the task force and regional council work, the state council has three general areas of focus. The first is to continue improving communication throughout the council and with each high school. The second is to improve AIDS/HIV education throughout the state with a goal to prevent the transmission of AIDS. Council members are at present very active in their school and community regarding this issue. We have lobbied for legislation to include AIDS/HIV education in curriculum, gathered support, and passed along valuable information on this subject. We will continue our work for the second part of the year in the hope that all students will gain the knowledge they need to live long, healthy lives.

The third focus is on education reform. The council has been active in lobbying for support of our schools and in pointing out the harms that are occurring through underfunding. We are looking forward to aiding the Board of Education in promoting school reform, and lobbying for student involvement in decision-making, during the current legislative session.

In spite of the obstacles, the state Student Advisory Council has succeeded in improving education throughout the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. As you will see in this report, we promise a rewarding year to come.

Legislative Task Force

The Legislative Task Force is responsible for sponsoring council legislation and lobbying for other education legislation that impacts upon students. This year, the task force has taken on the following agenda:

- Teacher Confidentiality. For the last five years, the council has sponsored legislation which would extend certain privileges of confidentiality to teacher-student relationships, with the hopes that this legislation would enhance the development of supportive relationships between teachers and students. This bill, sponsored by Representative Barbara Hildt, reached the third reading in the House, and with some minor changes in wording, moved to the Senate. A packed legislative agenda and budget impasse derailed its progress as the year ended. This is the furthest the bill has ever progressed. The bill has been filed for next year and the task force is confident that it will be enacted.

- Equal Opportunity by Sexual Orientation. This bill would amend Chapter 622 to include sexual orientation as one of the classes of students protected from discrimination in school settings. Current law protects students based only on race, gender, and religion. There is considerable initial legislative support for this bill based on current debates about sexual harassment policies for students and anti-violence initiatives. This bill is a refile from the 1990-1991 task force, and is sponsored by Representative Byron Rushing.

- Elimination of Academic Punishment. This bill would eliminate the practice of academic punishment, or the withholding of course credit or reduction of grades based solely upon attendance violations. This bill is a refile from last year's task force agenda. It is sponsored by Representative Barbara Hildt.

- AIDS/HIV Education. This bill would address the rise in numbers of adolescents being affected by the AIDS epidemic. The bill would amend Chapter 71, Section 1 to include AIDS/HIV prevention education as a recommended topic in the teaching of health education. It is sponsored by Representative Barbara Hildt.

The task force has prepared fact sheets on each bill to present to legislators and members of the Joint Committee on Education, Arts and Humanities and is currently preparing testimony. Throughout the remainder of the year, the task force will present testimony at committee hearings, organize regional councils and students in lobbying efforts, and monitor each bill's progress. The task force will continue to meet regularly with the Department's Legislative Office to review the progress of their own legislation as well as to review newly filed education bills that are student-related. Selected bills will be chosen to be supported or opposed by the council.

Social Issues Task Force

Since the Summer Leadership Conference, the Social Issues Task Force has directed its efforts towards developing a Condom Availability Fact Sheet and exploring preliminary plans to present a state-wide Conference on Discrimination.

The Condom Availability Fact Sheet is close to completion. A final draft is laid out in pamphlet form and will be presented to the council for approval at its February meeting. It includes information about using existing school forums as opportunities to raise the issue of condom availability and provides a variety of strategies that can assist in affecting change.

The task force is planning a conference for students on discrimination. It is tentatively scheduled for the first week in May, 1992 at Framingham State College. The Youth Expression Theater from Worcester will be key presenters. Workshops will follow the presentation to discuss issues of discrimination in schools such as sexual harassment, interracial marriage, sexism, homophobia and racism. All state and regional SAC representatives will be invited to attend the conference.

School Programs Task Force

The major focus of the School Programs Task Force is to revise the student handbook, Check it Out: Student Rights and Responsibilities for Massachusetts Students. The handbook was last printed in 1988. Once it is revised, the handbook will be distributed to students, school staff, and other organizations that are serving youth (eg. shelters, advocacy groups and legal support organizations).

The Secretary of State's Office has agreed to print 5,000 copies of the handbook at no cost as a gesture of support towards citizen education and students rights initiatives. A result of the collaboration between the task force and the Secretary of State's Office will be the inclusion of student voter registration information in the handbook.

To date, students in the task force have been assigned sections to revise and research regarding updated information about court decisions, law and resources available to students. As of the January SAC meeting, the task force had totally revised section II about if your rights are violated; revised most of section I; distributed assignments for a new section concerning special issues with regard to students and education; and made plans to update section III on Resources. Once completed, the draft will be submitted to the Department's Legal Office for their review prior to final layout and printing.

The task force has also drafted a survey to send to schools to collect information about innovative school programs; but it has been tabled for the time being in order to complete revision of the handbook.

Newsletter Task Force

The goal of this task force is to increase the effectiveness of the Student Advisory Council through statewide distribution of a SAC newsletter that focuses on the Council's work, student rights and student involvement in decision-making.
The task force will produce three issues of the newsletter. This includes distributing copies of laws for the Legislative Task Force, and questionnaires and pamphlets for the Social Issues and School Programs Task Forces. Copies of the newsletter will be published and distributed to council members, schools and interested parties.

The first issue will be distributed to regional councils in early February. It will focus on explaining the SAC and distributing lobbying material for the Legislative Task Force. The second issue will coincide with the Council's efforts to promote AIDS awareness and condom availability and the entire issue will be devoted to this subject. The third issue will publicize the School Programs Task Force's work on student rights.

It is recommended that next year's task force be trained early in Pagemaker and the general operation of newspaper production.

Regional Councils

Each regional council will be meeting four times throughout the year. This is a significant departure from last year's monthly meeting schedule for each council. In each meeting, law-related education and students rights will continue to be a substantial part of the agenda. Councils advise and review the initiatives of the state council and contribute a voice in the direction of state council priorities.

Councils also serve as important lobbying bodies for State Council-sponsored legislation.

Two meetings of each regional council have taken place to date. The first meeting focused on First Amendment rights, Record Regulations and sexual harassment legislation. Nancy Murray, Director of the Bill of Rights Education Project at the Mass. Civil Liberties Union, was a keynote speaker, and central office staff provided technical assistance in presenting workshops. The second meeting focused on social issues that are pertinent to young people. The agenda included training on AIDS/HIV prevention and sexuality education. The third meeting will continue to address issues and laws that directly impact youth, including the role of Handbook Review Committees and student participation in local school committees. The final meeting will serve as an orientation for new council members.

These meetings continue to be effective tools in training students in their roles as student leaders, increasing awareness of important issues and increasing student participation in taking responsibility over their education.